

Social influencers: What makes good acoustic design for hard of hearing?

Nobody likes being left out of the conversation, to feel like they are not important enough to be considered and included.

Yet this is the sad reality for many older people who struggle with retirement villages or aged care homes that have poorly-planned social spaces.

That is why the National Foundation for Deaf and Hard of Hearing (NFDHH) is calling on facilities -new and older -to consider their residents' needs in social situations.

“Like going to a noisy restaurant, often rest homes can have people talking at increased volume, there’s activities on, it’s by the kitchen – all adding up to a scene older people want to avoid,” Natasha Gallardo, chief executive of NFDHH says.

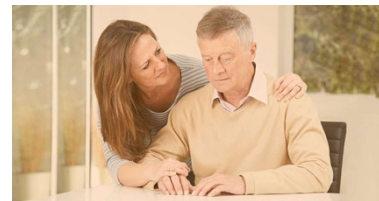
“It’s important to create spaces that work well for people with hearing loss, and that communal areas are designed for their needs, because research suggests being socially isolated and lonely may put them at a higher risk of depression, cognitive decline, neurological issues and other health conditions.”

More than 332,000 people are aged 75 years-plus, according to Statistics NZ. A 2017 NFDHH report – Listen Hear New Zealand – identified that 84 per cent of men and 77.6 per cent of women aged 75+ having hearing loss, 42.2 per cent of men and 34.4 per cent of women having moderate hearing loss.

A hearing aid wearer herself, Natasha says that COVID-19, and the need for people to wear masks has exacerbated the feeling of exclusion and isolation for people who are hard of hearing and rely on lip reading and facial expressions as clues to help them understand what is being said.

“Facing so many barriers to be heard and understood can be a real deterrent to socialising.” Natasha says.

“If you’re a resident in a retirement home or aged care facility, and there are noisy common areas that are vacuous and echoing, the struggle is heightened resulting in people retreating.



“Large communal spaces that have little sound absorption can make socialising far too challenging if you are hard of hearing. And as a result people become introverted and isolated. It’s not a good mix.

“Tackling anit-social spaces in communal areas is a big issue right now. I’m getting emails from residents and elderly groups, wanting to lobby retirement villages to improve the

acoustics in the community areas. Minimising the background noise is a key for many, not having ways to sit in smaller configurations that are facing each other is another.”

An important element of retirement village life is encouraging people to keep active and to join in and do things together. But that can mean en-masse gatherings.

Natasha says the principles of shared office spaces being constructed with a multitude of needs, are concepts that would also work well in retirement villages.

By 2048, the number of people aged 75-plus in New Zealand is projected to grow to 883,000. More than 47,000 people live in a retirement village, with a large number of new properties being built to meet anticipated demand.

But for existing properties, she suggests simple changes to help hearing aid wearers:

- Ensure residents are wearing their hearing aids regularly, so they do not just accept hearing loss and stop interacting with others.
- Ensure that residents’ hearing aid batteries are regularly checked, kept charged and repaired when necessary.
- Add improved acoustics through interior upgrades – soundproofing panels on the ceiling, or partial partitions around the room, and carpeting – “these will make the rooms feel more like home and really help with sound and echo. And those mini rooms make it easier for people to be able to have a conversation,” Natasha says.
- Provide a range of areas to socialise, both smaller areas and larger spaces, away from speakers, noisy kitchen areas or large group events, so that they are able to hear.
- Place seats in groups where people are facing each other for conversation, in well-lit areas.
- Consider getting in a national hearing aid provider such as Triton Hearing to come into the rest home to do free hearing checks. Those providers can assist with ensuring that hearing aids are working correctly, they can clean the devices and check that batteries are changed. They also offer free hearing checks to identify who may need to start wearing hearing aids.
- If you’re showing television programmes or hosting movie nights, choose a streaming service that has captions so everyone can follow what is happening.
- Stagger meal times so not everyone is dining at the same time, make tables smaller in seating numbers and move them further apart, and minimise music and television at these times.



“We aren’t suggesting elderly residential properties should be sterile and devoid of music and other sounds – but just that there are areas people can still congregate and catch up with others where it’s quieter. These community spaces must still be the heart of their home, welcoming and enjoyable.”

Home care help for hard of hearing

Discovering how social your home care clients are can be a key to ascertaining how they are managing their hearing loss.

“Even as an informal chat can identify whether people are going out less, if they are avoiding social situations -and it gives you a conversation starter, to check on why,” Natasha says.

“The COVID-19 pandemic makes people reluctant to go out, particularly if they struggle to understand people talking while wearing a mask. So clients may also be putting off having simple hearing aid checks, but these are vital.”

She recommends making notes on the level of volume you need to use when talking to clients, to be understood, and if you notice that deteriorating between visits, suggest they see an audiologist.

Another sign that a person’s hearing is deteriorating is the volume on their TV or radio, so keeping a record of that can also alert home care staff to issues.

“Often elder clients are not savvy with new technology, so when checking TV volumes, look to see if they have enabled captions, to help them watch their favourite shows.”

If you have time during your appointment, ask when they had their hearing aid batteries checked, or do they need repairs.

“These are often questions that family and friends don’t ask, so simple check-ins like this could make all the difference.”

How to tell if someone may have increased hearing loss:

- They turn the TV volume up louder or stop watching their favourite TV shows.
- They miss parts of the conversation, ask you to repeat it, or they respond in a way that is out of context.
- They lean forward with an ear towards the sound or cup their ear.
- They gradually withdraw and don’t like being in louder communal places, refusing social invitations or larger gatherings.



For more information visit the National Foundation for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing website: www.nfd.org.nz

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